

The University of Chicago

A STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF THE
MIGHTY WORD IN ANCIENT
HEBREW LITERATURE

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1938

By
WILLIAM JOSEPH MOORE

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The magic act consists generally of three elements: a duly qualified person officiating, ritualistic acts, and the pronouncement of magical words. In this dissertation we are concerned especially with the third of these elements. The magical word finds its most extreme expression in the magician's incantation but it is also in evidence in blessing, cursing, and oath-making. It is something more than a word in the ordinary sense of the term; that is, as a mere symbol of an idea. The magical word has super-verbal potency; it has a dynamic quasi-material character; it has an inherent power of carrying itself into effect, and of operating with mechanical efficiency merely because it has been uttered. In this concept of the magical word we may discern the failure of the primitive mind to make sharp distinctions between wish, word, and action; the magical word is something done as well as something desired and something spoken.

There is abundant evidence in the literature from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia that the people in those regions practiced magic and believed firmly in the power of the magical word. There are many indications that the Hebrews believed in, and practiced, the arts of magic; but it is remarkable that the Old Testament, when compared with the literature from Egypt and Mesopotamia, has a relatively small amount of magical content, and, particularly so little that might be fitted into the category of incantations. This fact is a tribute to the superiority of the Hebrew religion in its highest developments. Under the influence of outstanding leaders, who in the Jewish-Christian tradition are called "inspired," the Hebrews were able to achieve a conception of God and the universe with which the cruder expressions of magic, as represented by the incantation, were incompatible. That such an ideal was not the possession of all the Hebrews throughout the Old Testament period should be obvious to the intelligent student of the Bible, but the fact is that the antipathy to magic became so dominant that the official religion became set in its antagonism to.

the magic art, as illustrated by the strong prohibitions in Deuteronomy 18: 9-14 and elsewhere. Needless to say the religious officials would not be conscious of any inconsistency in condemning magic and at the same time sanctioning practices in their own ritual, such as the sprinkling of the ashes of a red heifer to cleanse from sin, which we would brand as magical. This "sanctified" magic of the ritual would not involve idolatrous trafficking with evil spirits and strange deities such as the practice of the magic art generally implied.

Although there is a paucity of materials that look like incantations in the Old Testament the many references to curses, blessings, and oaths (conditional curses) furnish plenty of evidence of the existence of the concept of the magical word among the Hebrews. An examination of these references reveals magical conceptions, it is true, but it shows also that there was an ethicizing and a "spiritualizing" of these practices (blessing and cursing)--a natural accompaniment of the finer developments in Hebrew thought.

Since the gods in the ancient world were usually thought of as glorified human beings, and their abilities as magnified human powers, the magical word of a god (the gods often acted as magicians) would be considered like the magical word of a human being with increased potency. In the literature from Egypt and Mesopotamia there are many references to the mighty word of the deity. In both of these bodies of literature there is personification or quasi-personification of the divine word.

In Genesis 1:1-2:4a we see the mighty creative word of God in operation. The deity speaks and immediately His word becomes material fact; "God said, Let there be light: and there was light." The similarity between the word of God here and the magician's word, which was thought to become material reality merely because of its having been uttered, should be obvious.

The "word of Yahweh," a technical expression applied to a medium of revelation, came into the greatest prominence in the classical period of prophecy. The coarser ecstasy and frenzy, characteristic of possession by the spirit in the earlier nebhi'ism, drops into the background in this period, while in some instances it appears that the word of Yahweh comes to the prophet through the ordinary processes of a rational mind. Unfortunately, the prophets do not give us psychological analyses of their experi-

ences, nor do they leave enough data for us to be sure of ourselves when we give our opinions as to what is meant psychologically by the statement, "the word of Yahweh came to--." However, we are not left in very much doubt as to the content of the word. At least in its highest expressions the word of Yahweh is "the clear intelligible moral word which speaks of justice, uprightness, fraternity and humility before God." It is a great cosmic force going out from the deity and operating in the world to create and sustain those values that man at his best seeks.

Even in the classical period of prophecy when it was connected with the most significant developments in religion in the ancient world, the word of Yahweh at times has the appearance of a mighty magical word. It bears an inherent power to realize itself in concrete activity--a characteristic of the magician's word. It is an act as well as a word. Yahweh sends forth His word (Jer. 42: 5), it runs swiftly (Ps. 147: 15), it comes to the prophet (Jer. 1: 4, 11) and it alights upon Israel (Isa. 9: 8). The word is like a fire and like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces (Jer. 5: 14, 23: 29). It pursues and overtakes the disobedient and works punishment upon them (Zech. 1: 6). It shall not return to Yahweh void (Isa. 55: 11). Because he is armed with this mighty weapon the prophet is one who hews and slays; he plucks up, breaks down, destroys, overthrows, builds, and plants (Jer. 1: 10, Hos. 6: 5); he does things as well as makes statements, acts as well as informs. Far from being a mere symbol expressive of an idea, the word of Yahweh is a real, active force released in the world. When this magical character of the prophetic word is realized, the symbolic acts of the prophets--such as the breaking of the bottle by Jeremiah, a symbol of the destruction of the people and the city--appear to have a magical significance, and the similarities between the prophet and the magician become quite pronounced.

Closely related to the prophetic word is the legal word, the revelation in the form of law through the priest. The prophetic word and the legal word of revelation are complementary, just as the ministries of prophet and priest are complementary. We are likely to overstress the differences between them and neglect to appreciate the significance of their common elements. To be sure, the prophet and the priest employ different techniques but really they are dealing with the same fundamental reality,

the intangible spiritual qualities of human life; and the content of the legal word is often of the same character as that of the prophetic word, for it, like the prophetic word, frequently deals with great ethical and social values and is directed towards the creation of ideal human relations. The legal word and the prophetic word, the two roots of the word of revelation, are brought together and unified in a peculiar way in Deuteronomy.

The last chapter of this dissertation deals with Hebrew antecedents of the Johannine Logos doctrine. These antecedents are taken to be the word of God and Wisdom. We concluded in earlier chapters that the ancient Hebrews shared with their neighbors the concept of the magical word, which was something quasi-material in character, possessing inherent power to carry itself into execution. The characteristics of the magical word are in evidence in the concept of the word of God, which was thought of as an objective reality charged with mighty magical power, an activity distinct, although not separate, from the deity himself. It is natural that there should be a tendency for the word to become personified in the later Old Testament period, and, finally to attain full personalization as it did in the New Testament church. John probably was not acquainted with the full history of the concept that he uses, and especially with its associations with magic, but having the background of Jewish thought that the Fourth Gospel seems to indicate that he had, he would very likely think of the word of God in these terms; that is, as a mighty word of super-verbal potency, something done as well as said, a concrete reality rather than an abstract idea. It would not be difficult for John to think of the word of God as a person and to see in the historical Jesus whom he worshipped the Logos, the creative and revealing Word of God, become incarnate.

The other antecedent of the Johannine Logos is the quasi-personified Wisdom of the Hebrew sages, a figure which represents a significant development in Hebrew thought. The importance of the identification of Logos with Wisdom cannot be appreciated fully unless one comprehends the religious and philosophical meaning that the Hebrews gave to the term hochma. In the richest passages in the Sapiential literature apparently the wise men are trying to tell us that Wisdom is an attribute of the deity as well as the possession of men (Prov. 8: 22 ff.). Wisdom is intelligence or reason, but, more than that, she is the ethical, aesthetic, and

all the finer spiritual qualities of human life that distinguish man from the beast (Prov. 3: 13-18, 8: 12 ff., 8: 35 f., and Wisd. of Sol. 7: 22-8: 1). She represents values that are infinitely superior to the most attractive of material considerations (Prov. 3: 14; 8: 10 f., 19). Of course, man achieves these values, he "gets" Wisdom (Prov. 4: 5, 7); but his best achievement is, at the most, merely discovery. He doesn't create these things by any independent human effort; ultimately they are the gift of God (Prov. 2: 6 ff.; Wisd. of Sol. 7: 22, and Ecclus. 1: 1, 9 f.). Not merely is Wisdom present here in the world awaiting man's discovery, but actually she appears even in the most common and unsuspected places (Prov. 8: 1 ff.) and thrusts herself on men, urging them to accept her gifts and to have fellowship with her (Prov. 1: 20 ff., 8: 4 ff., and 9: 1 ff.). That is, Wisdom, the finer spiritual things of human experience, represents man's achievement and, at the same time, divine revelation. God is active in human life; "a spark disturbs our clod." The sages are saying that the best that human beings experience is not fleeting and illusory, but has cosmic significance. What man in his best moments seeks is really part of the basic structure of the universe (Prov. 3: 19 f., 8: 22 ff.). The Hebrew sages present this wonderful philosophical and religious doctrine under the figure of the cosmic Wisdom going out from God as a revelation to man, "a breath of the power of God, . . . a clear effluence of the glory of the Almighty, . . . an effulgence from everlasting light, . . . an unspotted mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness (Wisd. of Sol. 7: 25 f.)."

The concepts of Word and Wisdom are brought together and united in the Logos doctrine of the Fourth Gospel. This union must have been natural for the author of the Prologue for even in the Old Testament literature Word and Wisdom approach each other; the Word takes on the rational and ethical characteristics of Wisdom, and Wisdom, like the Word of God, functions in creation and revelation. In Wisdom of Solomon 9: 1-2 they appear as parallel expressions. It should be noticed that fundamentally prophet, priest and sage dealt with the same intangible entity. Each interpreted it according to his own peculiar view of life and described it in his characteristic terminology; but in their best expressions the torah of the priest, the counsel of the wise man, and the word of the prophet were essentially the same. The three

ministries functioned according to the same common theological presuppositions: the finest experiences of man have reference to ultimate reality; there goes out from the mighty God of the universe a great cosmic divine agency (quasi-personified as Wisdom and the Word of Yahweh) bringing into the world order, justice, goodness, and all that man at his best desires; man can feel at home in the universe and can be truly happy only as he follows the dictates of his higher self, or, in other words, as he conforms to the will of God. The prophet, priest, and sage quite evidently dealt with the reality expressed in the Greek Logos doctrines--we believe that it was expressed also, though in cruder forms, in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia--namely, the existence of an immanent divine "reason" in the world. They relate the order and reason in the universe and the finer spiritual achievements of man to the very nature of the deity. Since in their highest expressions dabar and hochma moved very close to each other, it is not surprising that they are identified completely in the Logos of the Fourth Gospel.

